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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 001381

SIPDIS

FOR NEA ASSISTANT SECRETARY DAVID WELCH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2015

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AG](#) [WI](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: BOUTEFILKA STILL INTERESTED IN POW RELEASE

REF: ALGIERS 1365

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman; reasons 1.4 (B)(D)

1. (C) Presidential Chief of Staff Belkheir telephoned Ambassador July 9 at the instruction of President Bouteflika to signal the latter's continuing interest in a Lugar mission to secure the release of all Moroccan prisoners held by the Polisario. Specifically, he asked if Washington had reacted to the President's offer, conveyed to the Ambassador last week (Reftel), to provide a "protocol escort" for Lugar during the Tindouf portion of his visit. Belkheir explained this was an effort to accommodate U.S. concern that all phases of a Lugar mission be within a U.S.-Algeria framework.

2. (C) Ambassador said he had not yet received a response but speculated there would probably not be much Washington interest in simply a "protocol escort", as opposed to a much more senior official in the GOA leadership. In response to a question, Belkheir reconfirmed that the President had not specified the level of the "protocol escort." Ambassador stressed that with or without a Lugar mission, it was in Algeria's interest to secure the release of all the Moroccan prisoners. In addition to the humanitarian aspect, the POWs were a political burden and their continuing incarceration helped no one. Belkheir urged a response by Monday, July 11, because the President wanted to move ahead on the POW release issue "by other means" if the U.S. couldn't help.

COMMENT AND RECOMMENDATION:

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3. (C) The good news is that Bouteflika now seems to have accepted our argument that perpetuation of the prisoner issue is in fact a burden and, having reached this conclusion, wants to take steps to resolve it. Whether he still has in mind a full release, should the Lugar mission not/not take place, or only a partial release, we do not know. If Bouteflika would be willing to provide a senior official such as former minister and current Presidential Protocol Chief Rahal as the protocol escort, we urge Washington's urgent consideration. Rahal is a close confidante of Bouteflika who is highly visible in public, travels with Bouteflika on all his visits abroad, and participates in most of the President's meetings. Ambassador requests urgent guidance as to whether we would be prepared to go ahead with a Lugar mission under these circumstances.

ERDMAN